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SUBJECT: ABDULLAH HIGHLIGHTS DECENTRALIZATION PLATFORM IN  
PRESS CONFERENCE WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: KABUL 1590

11. (U) The Ambassador continued his public engagement with opposition presidential candidates with a joint press appearance alongside Abdullah Abdullah on June 21. During the event, covered widely by Afghan and international media, Abdullah highlighted his proposals to decentralize the government and promote a switch to a parliamentary system and elected governors. Abdullah, like Ashraf Ghani in an earlier press conference with the Ambassador (reftel), challenged Karzai to a public debate on the issues. Abdullah said he was grateful for President Obama's statement on the US impartiality in the election and looked forward to engaging Afghan voters with his platform during the campaign.

12. (U) The Ambassador told journalists he wanted to demonstrate US impartiality and commitment to credible, secure, and inclusive elections. The US neither supported nor opposed any one presidential candidate. Moreover, this year's election was an opportunity for Afghan voters to give the government a "report card" on its past five years, and for candidates to vigorously debate the issues and offer solutions to problems that most concern Afghans. The Ambassador's remarks, as prepared, follow in para 6.

13. (U) Journalists quizzed Abdullah on his ties to the United Front opposition coalition of prominent mujahideen leaders. Abdullah said he was an "independent candidate," running with the support of the UF and other political groups. Abdullah downplayed the results of a recent International Republican Institute poll showing Abdullah with single-digit support for his campaign. Abdullah instead pointed to the poll's findings that Afghans were disappointed in the government's performance in several areas, particularly fighting corruption. "This shows the people want change, and that they are upset Karzai has taken us from a good situation to a bad one," he said.

14. (U) During a private conversation before the press conference, Abdullah told the Ambassador he expected Karzai to increase the aggressiveness of his campaign against the leading candidates as Karzai becomes more "worried" about his own vulnerability. Abdullah requested more attention to government officials' alleged interference in the campaign. Separate from the election politics, Abdullah told the Ambassador he was concerned with deteriorating security in Kunduz and Baghlan, hopeful for better relations with Pakistan, and advised caution on managing Afghan public perceptions of US plans to increase troop deployments in Afghanistan. The Ambassador urged Abdullah to focus his energy on bringing his ideas for the future of the government to the people and to give the US and international community specific requests on what assistance could be provided to opposition campaigns to help create a fair and transparent election.

15. (SBU) Later that evening following the press conference, Foreign Minister Spanta called the Ambassador to express his objection to the media events. Spanta, almost certainly

calling on Karzai's behalf, said the events constituted interference in the campaign. The Ambassador replied that he had accepted the candidates' invitations to appear at the events, and had simply reiterated President Obama's statement on the United States' impartiality in the elections.

16. (U) Begin Ambassador Eikenberry's remarks, as prepared:

I am pleased to be here today with Dr. Abdullah, one of Afghanistan's most important political leaders. I am seeing Dr. Abdullah today as I did Dr. Ghani yesterday, as I seek - as US Ambassador - to meet with Afghanistan's presidential candidates to begin a political discussion.

In the coming days and weeks I will meet the presidential candidates in forums like this and others, to encourage a productive and substantive political debate. It will be a debate, I hope, that will energize the electorate and lead to a national discussion on the future course for your country.

A national discussion like this is not only in your national interest, it is in the US national interest. Our two countries will be partners over the long-term and we face challenges both in the immediate and beyond. The United States wishes to learn about the vision of those who may lead your country over the next five years. I began that conversation with Dr. Ghani yesterday, and I will continue it today with Dr. Abdullah, and plan to have that discussion with others in the coming days and weeks.

If Dr. Abdullah and others would indulge me, I would like to make some brief and general remarks on the US view and

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approach to the upcoming elections here.

As President Obama has said, each nation gives life to democracy in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its people. The United States does not support or oppose any particular presidential or provincial council candidate. Instead, we support the right of the people of Afghanistan to choose their own leaders. The US seeks an enduring partnership with the Afghan people, not with any particular leader.

This is an important time for Afghanistan, the first time you, the Afghan people, will run your elections. Afghanistan's first election five years ago was about establishing the state and government of the country. This second election this year is about the future of the government. The election is a chance for the people to give the government a report card on its performance over the last five years. It is a chance for all candidates to discuss their vision for the country's future.

The US is committed to working toward fair and transparent elections, and a debate of ideas. The international community, especially the US, is working hard to ensure these critical pieces during the election season.

There are excellent mechanisms in place to help ensure the quality of this election, including the Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission. The US and international community stand ready to assist should there be any shortcomings. We are interested in helping to ensure fair access to the media and the opportunity for candidates to travel to the provinces to meet voters.

We are certain the Afghan people will expect and will want and should have a debate on policy issues. People should make their choices based on the issues, not on political deals or non-policy commitments.

We want to see the candidates' thoughts on security, on ANA and ANP reform. We want to see the candidates' positions on how to improve poor governance, since poor governance causes

insecurity.

We look to the Afghan voters to hold the candidates to account.

Finally, the US looks forward to a substantive debate. We will look to the candidates and the voters to determine the way forward for your country, and the way forward in your country's partnership with the United States.

EIKENBERRY